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The modern internaut is traveling in a galaxy far far away, a digital galaxy, experiencing something genuinely new, but based on something very old. How do the origins of our storytelling culture translate to the interactive medium of modern websites? The potential to create genuinely rewarding experiences is there, but the internet has to embrace emotions to reach it.

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THE INTERNET.

'Anyone who has studied the history of technology knows that technological change is always a Faustian bargain: technology giveth and technology taketh away, and not always in equal measure (1). As far as technological advances go, the internet is one of the more significant of recent times. In our modern world, websites are transforming how we do just about everything. Maps, music, news, friends, strangers, naked strangers, live cameras, on bombs, history, celebrities, lies, truth, medical help, films, home videos, music, books, pizza, your house, my house, football, feedback, insults, dialogue, micro networking, micro targeting, Etcetera etcetera. The number of ways with which we now interact with websites is incredible and the internet is changing almost on a daily basis, fueled by both technology and ideas. But after a deep breath and a moment to reflect on all of this, there is one key question I am left with. How do our stories transfer to this medium. In and amongst all the varieties of websites, and the many different ways to interact with them, there must surely also be a great new way to interact with emotionally driven stories and experiences? What is the interactive equivalent of the film, or book? Yes, there is youtube. And there are blogs, and podcasts. But what about the next level? To put it another way, how can we tell an engaging story on the internet if a click is not quite the same as turning a page, and the screen is still not quite able to live up to the smell and feel of holding a printed book in your hands, or watching something in the cinema with dolby surround sound?

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STORIES ARE CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS OF OURSELVES AND OUR COLLECTIVE CULTURAL HISTORY.

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THE INTERACTIVE STORY.

Stories amplify basic human behavior. They reflect our ambitions, hopes, fears, traumas and triumphs. They bring us undeniable truths about ourselves, and each other. They are experiences which not only entertain but also deal directly with real social and cultural issues. *'Stories allow our individual actions or observations to be shown in a cultural, social, or political context. Stories are cultural representations of ourselves, and of our collective cultural history.'* (2) Through the internet, the methods with which we tell stories are slowly changing, multiplying, and diversifying, but a good story is still just as easy to define, and just as hard to create as it has always been. Simple, memorable, offering a journey, and most important, a powerful ending, a revelation, and moments of profound happiness or sadness. But interactive storytelling is new because it allows the reader to control the flow and direction of the story. The reader constructs their own version, and comes to their own conclusions. This works in games, but also in brand campaigns, educational applications, social networking and even virtual worlds. The concept of an truly interactive story has its origins in the Choose Your Own Adventure books, where several endings would be presented on different pages for readers to choose from. Fast forward to today and we have a huge diversification of this form of storytelling, a medium which has proven its creative and commercial potential. But the promise for the modern internaut of using this medium as a place for emotive experiences has not yet been realized.

(1) From a talk by Neil Postman, 1990.

(2) From an interview with Takayoshi Kishimoto, 2009.

CHALLENGE 1: PLAYING.

The reasons for this are many. To begin with, the attention span of the modern internaut is notoriously short. Our collective obsession with speed, refreshes and single sentence updates creates chaos, a drain, where all the knowledgeable is mixed, where the deep and the trivial coexist. A blurred collective brainwave where multitasking is the modus operandi and playing is thought of as solely an amusing past time. I think that brings us to a big misconception with emotional experiences. We need to challenge the common assumption that anything to do with interactivity is light entertainment. We should challenge that clicking is playing, and therefore trivial in nature or intent. Why not charge our experiences with real, and sometimes serious cultural or social context? Why not create interactive content that links to our fears, hopes or collective painful memories, just like they do with our pleasures and fantasies? Why not use the medium to explore all types of stories? An extreme example; Shindler's List is widely viewed and highly regarded, and no one feels guilty for watching it. But when game developer Luc Bernard released an online game about the holocaust, it was lambasted for being highly inappropriate. There were feelings of anger in response to the idea of 'playing' with this sensitive subject. It shows how experiencing a story is still very much misunderstood. Through computers and the internet, *'learning by doing becomes the rule rather than the exception. Since computer simulation of just about anything is now possible, one need not learn about the frog by dissecting it.'*⁽³⁾

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BRANDS CAN PLAY A MAJOR ROLE IN SHAPING ONLINE CULTURE INTO A MEDIUM WHICH IS EXPERIENCED, NOT JUST BROWSED.

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CHALLENGE 2: BRANDING.

Brands are leading the wave of interactive innovation we are witnessing online today. And through their ability to invest and the power of brand recognition, they have a premium position reserved for themselves because consumers know how to find them online. You go to nike.com and its obvious you'll get a brand related experience about your favorite running shoes. Or whatever. But *'too much of the potential of the web is limited by a desire to commoditize it or commercialize it rather than give it its rightful cultural and social context.'*⁽⁴⁾ What brands have in accessibility, they often lack in personality. And the internet is so personal that brands often stand out for this lack of personality. They interact with audiences using a combination of highly generalized stories and a heavy emphasis on product placement. This softly softly approach lacks a real journey for consumers. It doesn't involve their emotions. The most visible thread in our modern culture is advertising and the brave brands transcend their consumer base by creating content which reward or challenge them, and so draw them into their world. And by using the story to create that engaging content, brands can take up their role as interactive storytellers, and answer to the desire of consumers for involvement and ownership in their favorite brands. By being brave enough, and investing in the new form of storytelling, through interactive experiences, brands can play a major role in shaping online culture into a powerful medium which is experienced, not just browsed.

(3) From Being Digital by Nicholas Negroponte, 1995.

(4) From a discussion with Jelly Helm, 2009.

CHALLENGE 3: EMOTIONAL DESIGN.

'Players don't play to complete games, just as readers don't read to finish books. Players play to feel emotions. Game design is experience crafting for the purpose of emotion engineering.' ⁽⁵⁾ From a production point of view, online experiences are merging with games, video, and film production. They are using advanced animation techniques, complex music soundtracks and intelligent user interfaces. Their makers are part of complex productions involving many disciplines, often backed up by big budgets and extensive research and development. They no longer just design websites, they design emotional experiences, they tell stories. But this explains what for me is the third big challenge. As website production gets bigger on some level, how do users keep up? There is not one type of website, there are many. And although the internet is rich for its diversity, *'we increasingly lack ways to compare in an objective manner, and ways to describe in a shared language.'* ⁽⁶⁾ In short, the internaut doesn't know what to look for exactly, and this means the medium is underestimated by most of the people using it. Internauts, like film fans before them, want to be engaged by content rather than the medium alone. Content is king and the makers of websites have the ability to set their audiences expectations much higher by building emotional design into the production process; by using techniques such as emotional terrain maps, intensity graphs, and emotion time lines as visual mechanisms for engineering, writing and expressing emotional engagement in their interactive stories.

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CAN WEBSITES DO MORE THAN JUST OCCASIONALLY ENTERTAIN? CAN WEBSITES MAKE YOU CRY?

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CONCLUSION.

Emotions deal with intensity and internet is the place of speed. It is a huge challenge to bring emotions into this medium, and focus its power on the hearts of its users. But its not that we are using inefficient methods, more that we are using our methods inefficiently. The potential for incredibly powerful and immersive experiences is there, and increasingly interactive experiences do reach that potential already. Some challenge us emotionally, and prove to be truly memorable and engaging. But in such a diverse and fast-paced environment, they are still the exception, not the norm. For me, the challenges come down to one thing: can a website make you cry? Not that crying is the objective here, but being drawn into a story is, and its easily done when reading a book or watching a film. The internet is growing up and its users establish their habits quickly. We are at a key point of defining what an interactive experience means to an audience. And for the big majority of users of the internet, this does not yet include any real emotional story. Of course emotions aren't the answer to everything, and aren't applicable everywhere. But there is a specific place for an experience on the internet. Through blogs, art projects, virtual worlds, and with web documentaries, we are beginning to see that potential. The internet as a medium has the ability to do much more than entertain us occasionally. Its up to the makers of web based content to embrace that, and up to the internaut at large (thats you and me) to find out for themselves how powerfully they can be moved online.

(5, 6) From Emotions Engineering by Stéphane Bura, 2008.

ABOUT ANRICK BREGMAN.

Anrick's background is firmly grounded in animation and branding, working for many years as an animation director at both Cartoon Network and MTV Networks, and winning a range of awards during that time. Finding himself increasingly influenced and inspired by the interactive medium, he made a conscious a decision to focus on interactive work only, ending up at unit9 shortly after.

As an Interactive Director, Anrick focuses on dialogue, exchange and storytelling through the integration of ideas, interactivity and technology. He explores the medium functionally, but always in the context of emotion. The outcome is a steady stream of new experiences that question and redefine the interactive experience, and represent a new approach to storytelling.

WITH THANKS.

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